

COCKTAIL PROGRAM OF THE YEAR

KAPNOS BY MIKE ISABELLA
TAHA ISMAIL

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#RAMMYS17

This year's RAMMY Awards Gala at the Walter E. Convention Center paid tribute to some of the local restaurant industry's great culinary artists, business stalwarts, hard-working team members and creative minds. For this reason, it's a great night for restaurateurs to bask in the glow of their accomplishments and to be unified in celebration under one roof. The RAMMY award for Cocktail Program of the Year went to Kapnos in Washington, D.C. and Taha Ismail, beverage director for Mike Isabella Concepts. Ismail joined the group in 2011, working at Graffiato. He is also a partner at Pepita Mexican Cantina in Arlington, Va.

Mike Isabella Concepts has been growing at a fast pace. The restaurant group now has nine concepts in the area: Arroz, Graffiato, Kapnos and G in Washington, D.C., Kapnos Taverna, Yona and Pepita in Arlington, Va., Kapnos Kouzina in Bethesda, Md., and Requin in Fairfax, Va. A planned 40,000 square-foot, multi-concept culinary hall, Isabella Eatery, is in progress at Tysons Corner, Va.

The team that has made the cocktail program shine includes Jason Smith, recently promoted to assistant beverage director of Mike Isabella Concepts, Scotty Holland, Mary Kelly, and Hung

Nguyen. Holland is a former bar manager at Kapnos and worked with Ismail when it opened in 2013.

Kelly is a former Kapnos bar manager and Nguyen is the current bar manager of Kapnos. "It was exciting and it was an honor to be a winner," says Ismail. "I put a lot of work into it and the team did, as well."

The growing foodie scene in the D.C. area and its increasing desire for great food and drink options have been a boon to restaurants like Kapnos. A dedication to best practices in cocktail creation, tapping Mediterranean influences and spurring creativity have been key to the winning formula. Starting with the quality of spirits and the fresh juices used, the cocktail program is derived and elevated from a desire to present the freshest ingredients.

Cocktails are created with the ingredients in mind and then the spirits are fitted to the cocktail and their flavor profile. One of Ismail's favorites, the Angry Elf, is made with a chartreuse that is infused with serrano chiles, Altos Reposado Tequila, lemon juice and benedictine, flavorful and herbaceous. "It's a twist on a margarita," says Ismail.

The Casablancon native has made the ice program a centerpiece of excellence at the restaurants. At

Kapnos, the artisanal ice program produces different ice variations, including tubular, round, shaved and chipped ice—much of the ice cut from a big block of ice produced from chilled, purified water, as well as Kold Draft-produced ice cubes. Water quality is an essential consideration for the beverages.

Attention to the details has paid off for the Kapnos team, but creativity, drives the unique and exotic beverage experience. Kapnos uses nitrogen to keep the draft cocktails fresh, creating a top experience for its guests. The draft cocktails, which are included in the selections for happy hour, include Private Events, a mix of El Silencio Mezcal with Plymouth Sloe gin, tepache, agave, lime, and coconut, and Living the Dream, a harmony of Redemption Rye Whiskey, cinnamon, grapefruit, lemon and honey earl grey tea.

Another highlight of the Mike Isabella culture and the reason Kapnos team is drawing local attention is its hospitality. As we've seen threaded throughout many of the stories of top restaurants in the D.C. market, the guest experience continues to be a hallmark of the best food and beverage programs. With the help of Smith, Ismail has been investing much time recently on the new multi-concept Isabella Eatery that is opening soon.



TAHA ISMAIL POSING WITH RAMMY AWARD FOR 2017
COCKTAIL PROGRAM OF THE YEAR.
PHOTO COURTESY KAPNOS

TOP BARS AND RESTAURANTS LEVERAGE THE POPULARITY OF WHISKEY AND BOURBON

Whiskey remains a thriving choice in the brown spirits category. The elevated cachet of bourbon is also being embraced as a marketing and branding force. "We're a bourbon bar, not just a whiskey bar; we specialize in bourbon," says Max Cabrera, bar manager at Barley Mac in Arlington, Va., in a recent Eatery Pulse TV Episode. The bourbon bar and Italian/American restaurant is a highly-rated evening spot in the Rosslyn neighborhood, which is currently seeing much redevelopment. It benefits from the popularity of whiskey, and more specifically bourbon, the most famous of the American straight whiskey variety. Barley Mac reportedly has over 50 bourbons available.

Barrel, located on Pennsylvania Avenue Southeast, in Washington, D.C., opened in 2014. Initially, it was one of just three or four bars in the city focusing on whiskey; now that has changed, says

Bar Manager Parker Girard. A lively retreat from politics and the power lunches, it beckons to the politicians and lobbyists during the early evening, and to the local crowds in the late-night hours. Girard says he sees the crowds ask for the top-shelf whiskey, including coveted bourbon brands like Pappy Van Winkle. For top shelf, supply doesn't keep up with demand.

Bourbon's popularity is not waning. American straight whiskey volume, which also includes Rye, is growing 5.0 percent in the first half of 2017 and grew 5.1 percent in 2016, according to Beverage Marketing Corp., a Chicago-based research and consulting firm. Whiskey volume was the driver of growth for spirits. Total whiskey grew 4.0 percent in 2016, according to the Distilled Spirits Council, while total spirits, including whiskey, had volume growth of just 2.4 percent.



If there's any doubt about bourbon's popularity, one only needs to look at the recent launch of the Golden Circle Bourbon Shaving Cream Collection by the Art of Shaving. The "Bourbon Amber aroma that blends a rich, woody base with a warm, vanilla heart" is being promoted in partnership with "The Kingsman: The Golden Circle" movie.

ENHANCING THE EXPERIENCE

"We're a late-night, local bar first," says Girard. Customers will start out with a bourbon neat or rocks on the side and then move on to enjoy the variety of whiskey, spirits and craft beers on tap. Barrell has 300 whiskeys on the list and has access to smaller, less-known whiskeys that are introduced by distributors that may turn out to be diamonds in the rough. Variety is something that keeps the locals happy here, as well as the Southern-influenced small plates.

American spirits and bourbon are always the top two best sellers, notes Taha Ismail, beverage director for Mike Isabella Concepts and a 2017 Cocktail Program of the Year award recipient at the RAMMYS. "Bourbon pays the bills," he jokingly says. Ismail, too, enjoys having a variety of spirits for guests to enjoy and for mixing cocktails. A top shelf brand may not necessarily go with a particular cocktail. The juice and the flavors come first. There is an experimentation process that takes place to see which spirits fit well with the bar cocktails.

Customers like stirred drinks, including the Manhattan and Old Fashioned, says Ismail. Bitters are key and citrus and vermouth are very complementary to whiskey. Ismail has a penchant for Fee Brothers Bitters, particularly the old-fashioned and walnut bitters. Embrace creativity and depth of flavor. "In the

THE MILK PUNCH COCKTAIL AT BARRELL
PHOTO COURTESY BARRELL

winter, I like to use the spices in the bitters, (including) the cinnamon taste, bacon, spices, flavors of coriander and star anise. "My favorite is the Classic Old Fashioned, with old fashioned bitters and with a little top of sugar." Operations play a big part in enhancing the whiskey experience. For Barrell's Girard, there are three keys: people, options and greeter. He looks to hire people with a fun attitude, who are friendly. He also surrounds his customers with options. Variety is essential and customers may start with one type of beverage and migrate to others as long as there are fresh options. From experimenting with staffing, he learned that the host position is critical to improve the guest experience. "We realized that we had to have someone greet them (to start things off in the best way)."

